

Here Be Dragons

by James Lipton

The heretical thought began to take shape at the IN gate of the horse show arena as I watched an ambulance crew crouch over the motionless figure of a prostrate rider, while the fences that had been battered down by his falling horse were hastily reassembled. For *my* horse. And me.

That's when the voice, sounding suspiciously like my own, whispered, "Are you *really* going into that ring?" The Boy Scout practicing granny knots in my alimentary canal threw another loop around my stomach and pulled. "Feel that?" the voice growled. "It's fear!"...

Centuries ago, when a cartographer ran out of known world before he ran out of parchment, he is said to have inscribed the words "here be dragons" at the edge of the ominously blank *terra incognita*, a signal to the voyager that he entered the unknown region at his peril. But for some, like Columbus and Magellan, the warning seems to have been not a deterrent but a goad.

Long before Columbus probed the world's edge, the Chinese, seeking an ideograph to represent the turning point we call "crisis" in English, performed a miracle of linguistic compression by combining two existing characters, the symbols for "danger" and "opportunity" to create the character "wei-ji," which stands as an eternal assertion that, since opportunity and danger are inseparable, it is impossible to make a significant forward move without encountering danger; and, obversely, the scent of danger should alert us to the fact that we may be headed in the right direction.

I am fully aware that this notion flies straight in the face of a precept that has been drilled into most of us since we were first warned not to touch a stove or climb a tree. Danger, we have been taught, is a clear signal to turn *back*. But it has recently occurred to me that our filtered, homogenized lives, like white bread and refined sugar, are not only blank but unhealthful and, of all the vital elements that have been refined out of the, one of the most sorely missed is hazard.

I mean *real* hazard, not the broad side of sado-masochism and *machismo* assaulting us from screen and tube and printed page. Our apparent hunger for manufactured violence is, in my view, a symptom of the malnutrition that has resulted from the lack of genuine challenge in our daily diet. Lacking challenge, we seek "excitement." Finding excitement unsatisfying, we look for "thrills." If pulled punches, blank cartridges and simulated agony pall, we can shift, for the mere price of a ticket, to the more vivid precinct of arena or stadium, where the blood is real, the bone sometimes actually snaps, the flesh is truly assailed. And if all else fails, there is Evel Knievel, putting his life on the line. For real. For money. For *us*!

What are the common denominators in all these experiences? First, we face every one of them sitting down, literally and figuratively. Second, in every instance the blood, bone, and flesh are someone else's. Whether the agony is real or simulated, on tube or tube, *it isn't ours*. We are

buying or borrowing someone else's jeopardy, because, I believe, we crave the stimulation of challenge, we are starved for the elemental exhilaration of fear, which triggers biochemical changes in us, making us suddenly intensely aware of our own existence.

Socrates warned that the unexamined life isn't worth living. Neither, I submit, is the unexperienced life.

Before I am accused of advocating Russian roulette for subteens and hang-gliding for the geriatric set, let me define precisely what I mean by *hazard*. I am speaking of the kind of risk-taking that seems to be involved in the conscious abandonment of safe physical, emotional, and intellectual redoubts, in favor of new paths where dragons may lie in wait. I am sacrilegiously equating a state of fear with a state of grace, *if* the fear results from testing treasured beliefs and established patterns--one's own, not someone else's. Finally, I am advocating a reconditioned reflex that can begin to take a kind of perverse delight in the sensation of fear, and see looming danger as a beckoning finger...

Like the ringmaster's finger, beckoning me through the open IN gate. The horse, feeling my fear, as horses can, nickered and backed a step. That's when I heard the second voice, emerging from the dying wail of the departing ambulance. "Feel that?" the voice said, "*That's why you're here.*"

I wish to attach no undue significance to that unexceptional moment in an unremarkable life. All I can say with any certainty is that, since then, fear has become a different kind of signal for me, a green (or at least amber) light instead of a red one. The results, by anyone's standards but my own, would probably be judged unspectacular. But I remain convinced that something changed in me at that IN gate. I believe it because my horse, sensitive as always to its rider's emotional state, suddenly stopped backing, contracted like an accordion and bounded into the ring, as strangely intrigued by the hazards ahead as I was.

There have been many fences since then--of wood, words, critical eyes, alien minds--some cleared in a bound, some missed with a clatter, but all approached with the same mixture of fear and elation that gripped me in that arena, and haunts me now at the thought of what these wise or foolish words may evoke in you as you read them. A loud, clear voice is saying, "Tear them up," and that of course is an unmistakable signal that I have written myself into risk. *Here* be dragons. Good.

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